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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000306

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SUBJECT: COALITION REACHES A COMPROMISE ON DEMOCRATIC  
CONGRESS

REF: MINSK 294

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

#### Summary

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¶1. (C) In a surprising move, the leaders of the opposition coalition reached an agreement on the purpose and format of the democratic congress. During a recent conference co-sponsored by U.S. NGO IRI, coalition leaders agreed to let the regional coalitions decide on the issues currently paralyzing the opposition. Backed by U.S. NGOs, the coalition will soon hold seven regional conferences to determine, among other things, whether the "leadership issue" should be raised at the next democratic congress. The approach, according to coalition leaders and activists, represents a leap forward in transforming the coalition into a grassroots movement. Regional activists and NGO representatives present at the conference also received a copy of the coalition leadership's action plan, which calls for pressing the regime into a dialogue with the opposition, and expressed their preliminary support of the document. End summary.

#### Nuts and Bolts of Compromise Plan On Congress

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¶2. (C) On the margins of an April 11-12 conference hosted by the Council of Europe and U.S. NGO International Republican Institute (IRI) in Vilnius, opposition coalition leaders Aleksandr Milinkevich, Anatoliy Lebedko from United Civic Party, Vintsuk Vyachorka from Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), and Sergey Kalyakin from Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) agreed to a grassroots democratic approach to address the issue that was threatening to split the coalition -- who will lead the coalition (reftel). (Note: A representative of the U.S. NGO National Democratic Institute was also present at the conference. End note.) Specifically, the coalition leaders agreed to the following course of action:

-- Seven regional conferences will be held almost simultaneously within the next two to three weeks in each of the six oblasts and Minsk. A national congress consisting of all the delegates to the regional conferences could be held as early as late May.

-- Delegates to each of the regional conferences will consist of: 1) activists who collected signatures in the run up to the 2007 local elections, 2) elected delegates from the October 2005 democratic congress, and 3) activists who collected signatures to participate in the October 2004 parliamentary elections. There would be approximately 50 to 100 delegates in each regional conference.

-- Regional conference delegates will: 1) vote on the coalition action plan, interim constitution ("Small Constitution"), and economic plan originally created for the national congress; 2) decide whether the "leadership issue" - i.e., appointment of a single leader and restructuring of the coalition's political council -- should be addressed at the national congress; and 3) nominate seven delegates to represent civil society in each oblast. Thus, a total of 49 civil society leaders will also attend the national congress.

-- The coalition's organizing committee will tally the votes on the agenda for the national congress from the regional conferences and the regional conference delegates and the 49 civil society delegates will convene (hopefully in Minsk) for the national congress.

¶3. (C) The coalition's Political Council (PC), which consists of Milinkevich, political party leaders, and notable political and civil society figures, also gathered in Vilnius and officially approved the compromise plan developed by Milinkevich, Vyachorka, Lebedko, and Kalyakin. In addition, many NGO leaders and rank and file party members from Minsk and the regions attended the conference and expressed their firm support for the PC's decision.

#### Conferees Discuss Joint Action Plan

¶4. (C) The PC also shared with members of the democratic opposition present in Vilnius the proposed action plan for promoting democratic change in Belarus. (Note: The PC had already approved the action plan and other documents for the national congress. End note.) Coalition members said they were generally satisfied with the action plan, which calls

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for an "evolutionary" instead of "revolutionary" approach to democratic change, and were anxious to put it into action.

¶5. (C) Coalition leaders passed Pol/Econ Chief, present at the conference, a copy of the action plan. The plan hinges on the supposition that the regime's only viable exit route from the "inevitable and unfolding socio-economic crisis" in Belarus is through the peaceful, gradual "evolution" of the country's political and economic system. The plan asserts that the government must cooperate with the opposition to ensure "peaceful, gradual" democratic reforms, and the precondition for dialogue is the release of all political prisoners. In order to force Lukashenko to the negotiating table, the action plan envisions increased and sustained pressure on the regime on at least four fronts: 1) more peaceful street demonstrations in part to demand new elections, 2) wider information campaign, 3) intensified dialogue with willing members of the nomenclature and political class, and 4) strengthening of the international pressure. The plan presupposes that as the economy worsens and the masses become more visibly upset, Lukashenko may conclude that his only option is to sit at the negotiating table with the opposition.

#### Reactions on Compromise Plan

¶6. (C) Following the meetings, Pol/Econ Chief spoke with a number of participants. Clearly elated, Kalyakin and Lebedko said they were "very pleased" that the coalition leadership reached a compromise. Lebedko added that Milinkevich's presence and participation was crucial. (Note: Milinkevich unexpectedly cancelled his travel plans to participate in meetings organized by Russia's Union of Right Forces in St. Petersburg. End note.) Lebedko explained that it became painfully obvious to the leaders that the coalition's action plan was likely to lay dormant until they could resolve the leadership issue. He stressed that the compromise plan alleviates the pressure on the coalition leaders by "punting the issue" to the opposition leaders in the regions, noting

that "bottom-up management" of the opposition was finally beginning to take root.

17. (C) Agreeing with Lebedko's general assessment that the compromise gave everyone "a small victory," Milinkevich deputy Viktor Korniyenko stressed that the Milinkevich camp is particularly pleased that regional leaders will define the agenda of the national congress. Milinkevich strongly believes that party and NGO activists in the regions widely support the de facto coalition leader's vision of a highly organized, vertical leadership structure with a single leader (i.e., Milinkevich). Leader of independent entrepreneurial association Viktor Gorbachev said he was pleasantly surprised that the coalition leaders found a way to break the gridlock. Gorbachev and Korniyenko expressed deep appreciation for the efforts made by U.S. NGOs IRI and NDI and U.S. Embassy Minsk to keep the coalition leaders at the negotiating table.

Comment  
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18. (C) Recognizing that personal ambitions prevented them from reaching a compromise on the congress, the coalition leaders demonstrated a surprising degree of maturity by giving regional activists a voice. Party deputies and coalition members in the regions often tell us that they play little role in determining the coalition's purpose and course. Although the coalition leaders will try to steer the direction of the regional conferences by making more trips to the regions, deepening contact with their troops in the field only reinforces the transformation of the opposition into a broad grassroots movement. NDI and IRI representatives told us that the coalition is finally on the right track and stated they will provide technical and financial support for the regional conferences and national congress.

19. (C) Although coalition leaders remain firm on the immediate release of political prisoners, they admit that their call for a dialogue with the regime represents a fundamental shift in the opposition's approach to democratic change. The coalition's assumption that average Belarusians find the opposition unappealing because of its outspoken contempt for Lukashenko has some validity. However, the Belarusian dictator currently remains far from convinced that the coalition is a worthy negotiating partner. During his April 12 press conference with state and independent media outlets (septel), Lukashenko noted that he was willing to have a dialogue with the opposition but the latter was "not really ready for one" and was only interested in pandering to

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the West. Lukashenko will only seriously entertain a dialogue -- if at all -- with the opposition when he perceives that the opposition is united, strong, and popular. Although the coalition still has a steep hill to climb, the compromise plan seems to be a step in the right direction.  
Moore